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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BRUSSELS 000106

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [BE](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: EMBASSY CONTINUES VIGOROUS CAMPAIGN OF AWARENESS
ON AFGHANISTAN IN ADVANCE OF LONDON CONFERENCE

REF: A. 09 BRUSSELS 1737
[1](#)B. 09 BRUSSELS 1739

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Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Embassy Brussels, and particularly Ambassador Gutman, have intensified their efforts to raise Belgian public and official awareness, understanding and support for the President's strategy on Afghanistan since the new year. The strategy has included a vigorous round of media interviews, discussions with government and opposition politicians, and an unprecedented appearance before a joint committee of the Belgian parliament. His arguments appeal to Belgium's international credibility as an important tool in rallying support across Europe to do more to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan as envisaged by the President's recently announced Afghanistan strategy. In meetings with the severest critics of Belgium's already proportionately strong military engagement in Afghanistan, the Ambassador found significant support for more civilian assistance to the country. Using requests for military protection we have received from the Belgians for their aid workers in Haiti as a metaphor, he began to develop sympathy and understanding for why security forces are needed in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Letermé, however, remains a hard sell, although even he feels the January 28 London Conference on Afghanistan could generate "new views." End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The Belgian government, in the persons of Defense Minister Pieter De Crem, Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere, Minister of Development Cooperation Charles Michel, Interior Minister Annemie Turtelboom and Justice Minister Stefaan De Clerck, appeared before the Belgian parliament on January 13. These appearances did not break new ground, but they confirmed the Belgian government's intention to maintain its current commitment through the end of 2010. Essentially, this consists of providing security for Kabul Airport, six F-16's with pilots and support personnel based at Kandahar, participation in a German-led PRT in Kunduz and two OMLT's on the ground in Kunduz. The Belgians also recently deployed a contingent as part of NATO Allied Land Component Headquarters, led by Major General Hubert De Vos as Deputy Commander for Resources, from Heidelberg to Kabul. The debate in Parliament was an opportunity for those who oppose the current Belgian commitment to Afghanistan, and even more bitterly oppose an increase in that commitment, to again make their views known. Key among these are Flemish Socialist Dirk Van Der Maelen (Sp.a) and Flemish green party member Wouter De Vriendt (Groen!). Their attitude is that "the war in Afghanistan cannot be won". Other skeptical parliamentarians include Hilde Voetmans (Open VLD) and former Defense Minister Andre Flahaut (PS), although their

objections are more practical and political than ideologically or categorically opposed.

¶3. (U) Defending government policy, De Crem pointed out successes in Afghanistan so far, and Vanackere noted that the government's critics had not presented any other policy solutions. Vanackere said that it is not a good idea to present a timetable for withdrawal because it will give the Afghan people the impression that Belgium is giving up on them. Although there seemed to be some support for extending Belgium's participation in ISAF beyond 2010, there was no mention of the possibility of doing more than the measures announced in early December by the government. These consist of 2-3 police trainers and a magistrate, and an intention to increase development aid if the Karzai government can show progress in good governance and anti-corruption efforts.

¶4. (U) With the President's recently announced Afghanistan strategy in mind, and with the January 28 conference in London fast approaching, the Ambassador and the Embassy wished to energize public discussion of Belgium's role in ISAF and Afghanistan. During a public panel discussion on January 13 hosted and reported by the center-left Dutch language daily De Morgen, and amplified at a luncheon held for all major media outlets in the country the following day, the Ambassador laid out an argument for an increased Belgian military and civilian presence in Afghanistan. He said that he finds broad agreement that terrorism is a real threat to Europe and to Belgium. He then told the journalists that he wished to clear up some misconceptions in the public mind about President Obama's strategy. First, he said, the President is well aware that a purely military solution to terrorism is not possible. He knows that sustainable social and economic development and an integrated civilian and military approach is necessary. It is necessary to put into

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place enough security to permit development assistance to have an effect. This is the reason for the "surge" of 30,000 U.S. and an expected 7,000 ISAF partner troops. The Ambassador urged Belgium to consider sending 50, 75, or 100 troops to the theater, although he stressed there is no specific ask in that regard. "Something like 100 troops would be noticed by the Allies," he said. He said that he recognizes that Belgium's financial and manpower resources are smaller than other European partners'. However, he said that Belgium's participation is important because of Belgium's credibility as a country without a particular ax to grind in international affairs. If Belgium participates, it is an example of moral leadership that sends a strong message to other partners in Europe and elsewhere that a unified and determined response to the problem of Afghanistan is needed. The Ambassador repeated this message in public media and private meetings with key officials over the next week to ten days.

¶5. (U) The Ambassador's words at the media luncheon evoked a strong reaction. The Belgian wire service Belga issued a news alert headlined "U.S. Ambassador Asks for 100 Troops for Afghanistan" within 15 minutes of the journalists leaving the Ambassador's residence. The story under the headline correctly reported that the numbers mentioned by the Ambassador were symbolic and that no formal or explicit request has been made by the United States. Nevertheless, the headline spread and other media issued similar reports based on the Belga dispatch. Coverage of the Ambassador's message about Belgium's credibility and moral leadership dominated the evening television news and the next day's print media. MP's Van Der Maelen and De Vriendt both issued press releases. De Vriendt's said "the U.S. Ambassador's proposal to send 100 troops to Afghanistan is absurd." "I do not believe we will solve the problems in Afghanistan with more troops," said Van Der Maelen. On Monday, January 18, a key francophone Socialist minister, Laurette Onkelinx, said flatly that "there will not be anything additional for the time being given that we are already massively present in

that country."

¶6. (U) At this point, the Embassy intensified the Ambassador's press appearances and his schedule of private meetings with politicians, especially those opposed to an increase. It also issued a press release pointing out that in essence, we agree that there is no purely military solution to the problems in Afghanistan and emphasizing that "given Belgium's immense credibility within the partnership of nations, Belgium's participation in the increased civilian reconstruction and law enforcement efforts, and in the increased military effort designed to provide the security framework to allow such reconstruction efforts to proceed, would be very meaningful." The press release also offered to discuss Afghanistan at length with members of Parliament. On January 18, the Embassy received a call from the parliamentary committees that deal with foreign relations and defense inviting the Ambassador to address a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Defense and Foreign Relations on January 20.

¶7. (U) Also on January 18, the Ambassador appeared on a leading late-night political talk show, "Phara". The other guests in the round-table discussion were the Minister of Defense and the newly appointed Archbishop of Belgium. That night, "Phara's" audience of 200,000 viewers heard the Ambassador's explanation of Belgium's potential role in Afghanistan directly.

¶8. (C) January 20 the Ambassador had an active schedule which included a meeting in the city of Mons with the head of the francophone Socialist Party (PS). However, he told Di Rupo how during the weekend the Belgian B-FST team sent to assist in Haiti had run and called the State Department operations center and obtained additional protection from the U.S. troops in Haiti. The situation was analogous to Afghanistan, the Ambassador said, in that it was impossible to provide the needed humanitarian assistance without proper security. This idea hit home with Di Rupo and also with the Belgian politicians the Ambassador talked with over the next few days. A greater Belgian effort is "very difficult", Di Rupo told the Ambassador, but "not impossible". Di Rupo emphasized mainly the cost of such an effort, but said he would "propose something to Prime Minister Leterme" because Belgium should show it is ready to help. The Ambassador's visit to Mons was well-covered by the local and regional

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newspapers and television stations.

¶9. (C) Later on January 20, the Ambassador met with the Groen! party's De Vriendt. He then appeared before the Senate and House Foreign Affairs and Defense committees, once again emphasizing that the important thing in the Afghanistan debate is what Belgium brings to the table in credibility and support, and only secondarily in numbers of troops. De Vriendt and Vandermaelen stated their opposing views in detail. De Vriendt did say, however, that 2010 will be a "year of truth" and a new strategy will have to be developed based on results. MP Georges Dallemagne (CDH) echoed some of the themes sounded by Di Rupo. He said that Belgium needs to work hard in cooperation with the U.S. to convince other European countries that Afghanistan is important to global security. Belgium should participate in the Afghan mission in proportion to what it can contribute, he said, which should include "a more important civilian contribution". At the same time, he said that such support must be efficient and the Afghan government must show it is willing to combat corruption. Dallemagne, one with Afghanistan critic Dirk Van Der Maelen (SP.A) and the other with the president of the Belgian Senate, Armand De Decker (CDH). De Decker, who is a former Minister of Development Cooperation (2004-2007) in the Verhofstadt government, said that there is still no good policy at the EU level for development in Afghanistan. The Ambassador discussed the need for more military and civilian help at

length. When the meeting ended, De Decker told the Ambassador that he would be making an announcement that would be pleasant to his ears. In fact, later in the day, De Decker released a press statement that called on Belgium to explore leading a PRT. The press reaction to De Decker's statement noted that De Decker's new strategy followed a lengthy meeting with the Ambassador.

¶13. (C) Van Der Maelen was more difficult to convince. However, the Ambassador and Van Der Maelen developed a warm personal relationship and found several areas of agreement: that one cannot leave the problem of terrorism unaddressed, that the solution to Afghanistan is not a military one, that there is a need for development in the country to achieve peace and security. Van Der Maelen said he would support the idea of more development aid for Afghanistan. However, he simply does not believe the West can succeed in making Afghanistan secure. His alternative suggestion is that troops from Muslim countries replace American and European soldiers and that a regional conference of Afghanistan's neighbors and the Taliban be held to seek a negotiated peace.

¶14. (C) On January 25, the Ambassador met with Andre Flahaut (PS) in his office. The Ambassador discussed his various meetings over the previous week, noting that in spite of differences, he had found areas of agreement. Flahaut said that he had not heard a clear statement of a need for troops from the Minister of Defense. He added that he thought leading a PRT would be a good way Belgium could contribute more. He sees a need for a thorough re-thinking of Belgium's contributions to Afghanistan that will bring not only the

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government but also the Flemish Socialists into agreement. Flahaut suggested that perhaps Belgium could do more, including adding one or two C-130 transport aircraft, medical teams, demining experts, and reinforcement of a PRT with more people. At the same time, he reiterated his misgivings about De Crem, criticizing his lack of "transparency" in putting his plans for Afghanistan into effect.

¶15. (C) Later that same day, the Ambassador met with Prime Minister Leterme to stress the points he had been making in the press and to other Belgian politicians. Leterme told the Ambassador that the decision on the Afghanistan deployment had been made after President Obama's Afghanistan speech. He defended the size of Belgium's deployment as proportional to Belgium's social, military and economic weight. However, he did say that Foreign Minister Vanackere's report from the January 28 London Conference could "bring new views."

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